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Programs for the Handicapped: Handicapped Children's Early Education Assistance Act of 1968 P. L. [Public Law] 90-538.

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The Handicapped Children's Early Education Assistance Act of 1968 (Public Law 90-538), which provides for establishing 75 to 100 model programs for preschool handicapped children, is reviewed in terms of the problem it is intended to meet. Major provisions of the law are summarized, including those for program development and implementation; parent, community, and professional education; and program evaluation. A definition of handicapped children and the amount of appropriations authorized are also given. (LE)

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HANDICAPPED CHILDREN'S EARLY EDUCATION ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1968 P. L. 90-538

The President on September 30, 1968 signed the Handicapped Children's Early Education Assistance Act (P.L. 90-538). This new law will provide for the establishment of from 75 to 100 model programs designed to develop successful approaches in assisting preschool aged handicapped children.

This issue of "Programs for the Handicapped," will be devoted to a review of the basic provisions of this new legislation.

This new program,which is termed by some as the "First Chance " to learn by the handicapped, will be administered by the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, Office of Education, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

The President signs P.L. 90-538 with (left to right) Representatives Hugh Carey, Dominick Daniels, Carl Perkins, Albert Quie, and Senator Winston Prouty and Secretary Wilbur Cohen.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
Secretary's Committee on Mental Retardation
Wilbur J. Cohen, Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20201

THE PROBLEM

Over 5 million children suffer physical, emotional, and mental handicaps; yet it is estimated that fewer than 2 million currently receive special educational services. These children require such attention if they are to fulfill their potential as participating, contributing members of society. The handicapped child needs special educational services responsive to educational and environmental needs.

There is a great deal of evidence that the preschool years are most critical for a child's future development. The lack of attention to a child's handicapped condition during the early childhood developmental period can lead to irreversible deterioration of his potential for leading a normal, useful life. Yet early and sustained professional attention carries the promise of significant gains.

Research conducted recently indicates that at age 4, a child has already developed 50 percent of his total intellectual capacity as an adult; by the age of 8, he has attained 80 percent of his capacity. The best time to attack a child's mental and emotional handicaps appears to be the period from birth through the early childhood years.

National and local programs providing early education for the handicapped child are in their earliest stages of development. In some States, State law currently prohibits the participation of children under the age of 6 in school programs for handicapped youngsters.

This seeming lack of interest to the needs of the preschool handicapped child in Federal, State, and local programs does not arise from a general failure of special educators to recognize the problems. In fact, most State plans for education programs for the handicapped under title VI-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act place preschool programs high on their list of goals. However, the development of preschool programs has been inhibited by the absence of a program of distribution of information concerning successful approaches which have been developed. Even more detrimental has been the absence of model or prototype programs which could provide the basis for local planning.

Because of the absence of viable models for preschool and school age handicapped children, States and local educational agencies overlook the fact that it may be less expensive to channel resources toward infancy and early childhood development, thus reducing the need for more expensive services later on in the handicapped child's life.

Reflecting these concerns, the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children this year called for the development of preschool educational programs for handicapped children. The Report of the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children stated that:

> "When a handicapped child is sent to an institution for the mentally retarded and stays there over the period of his lifetime, it costs society a minimum of $75,000. If a child can be rehabilitated through special education at an early age, the community saves many thousands of dollars .... Therefore the Committee recommends that: Congress should appropriate funds necessary for the development of model programs of preschool education for handicapped children...."

SUMMARY OF MAJOR PROVISIONS OF THE LAW

The Act enables the Commissioner of Education to make grants or contracts to public and private nonprofit agencies for the development and implementation of experimental programs. These grants will be distributed on a broad geographical basis throughout the Nation. This does not mean that there necessarily must be a single program in each State. It is even conceivable that some States will combine their resources and develop regional centers.

Projects will also be established in both rural and urban areas. In some large metropolitan communities more than one project may be deemed appropriate.

Preschool and early education present unique problems to various areas and should therefore transcend traditional geographic boundaries.

Support will be given to all lines of attack on the problems of handicapped children that possess professional credibility and recognized expertise. It is intended that there be as great a diversity among projects as possible, so that models will be developed which are applicable to as many different handicapping areas and particular environmental areas as possible.

Although it is usually customary to conceive of education with a group of children in a classroom, the concept of early childhood education is broader than a simple classroom unit. Under the Act experimentation and evaluation in correspondence courses, home instruction, individual instruction in group settings, and integration of handicapped with normal children is possible.

The model preschool program should stimulate all areas of the handicapped child's development including his emotional, physical, intellectual, and social needs. Therefore, it is urged that programs encompass not only all disabilities, but all age groups from birth to 6 years of age.

The portion of the Act dealing with participation of parents has two major purposes: (1) to provide the parents with counseling and guidance on how they can effectively respond to the special needs of their handicapped children; and (2) to provide supportive supplementary programs which will aid parents in better coping with problems as they arise.

Few parents are prepared psychologically or financially to shoulder the enormous burden of care and treatment for a handicapped child. Parents of handicapped children may have fears, and are often frustrated and bewildered. They need help in understanding their child's disability. They need help in working with their handicapped child. Therefore, it is deemed appropriate to provide educational programs for handicapped children which provide comprehensive supplementary aid for their parents. In addition, it is anticipated that programs will enlist the help of the parents as allies and associates of educators to provide a total program.

Another aim of the Act is to acquaint the community with the problems and potentials of handicapped children. This feature is included in the belief that society, including educators, too often underestimates the capacities of these children and, as a result, often limit their opportunities to develop and function as constructive members of our society.

The Act directs that each program be coordinated with the local school system in the community being served. Dissemination of information, in-service training and other aspects of the model programs will be designed to encourage the development of successful early education programs throughout the State and neighboring areas. Where possible, new demonstration programs will be established in settings so that they may be used for the training of teachers, speech pathologists and audiologists, clinicians, psychologists, physicians, and other supportive personnel whose contributions are required in effecting good early childhood education of the handicapped.

The Act provides for a Federal share of up to 90 percent of the cost of a project. The non-Federal share may be in cash or in kind. The requirement of a non-Federal share is designed to encourage a commitment of community and other public and private agencies to the success of the programs through tangible involvement from the program's inception.

Evaluation

P.L. 90-538 authorizes the Commissioner to provide, either directly or through contact with independent organizations, a thorough and continuing evaluation of the effectiveness of each program assisted. Each program or center will be expected to include in its planning an evaluation component to help in the continuous improvement of the program. In addition, the Commissioner is expected to provide an overall evaluation of the total program once it has had time to become operational.

It is expected that not all approaches will prove to be of equal value. Some will be outstanding, while others may fail. Evaluation should have two components--one, to measure the total effectiveness of the program or how it does the job; the other, to provide feedback to each program about its own performances so that self-renewal or improvement may be built in as the program progresses. The evaluation aspect of this legislation is important in that it is advantageous for the educational community to compare programs which are both effective and ineffective so that successful approaches can be replicated and ineffective attempts can be avoided.

Definition of Handicapped Children

Handicapped children for the purposes of this Act are defined as: mentally retarded, hard of hearing, deaf, speech impaired, visually handicapped, seriously emotionally disturbed, crippled, or other health-impaired children who by reason thereof require special education and related services.

Appropriations Authorized

The Act authorizes the appropriation of $1 million for fiscal year 1969, $10 million for fiscal year 1970, and $12 million for fiscal year 1971. The sums appropriated for the first year will be used primarily as planning funds for demonstration projects. It is estimated that the $1 million will support the planning phases for these centers. It is estimated that the operational cost of a unit might be $100,000 - $125,000. At this cost per unit approximately 75-100 centers could be established. This will allow widespread dispersion over the country.

Conclusion

P.L. 90-538 fills a long-overlooked gap in the Nation's effort to assure all her citizens of the opportunity for good health, a good education, and equal participation in the benefits and responsibilities of American society. Too often, the Nation's handicapped have been denied these opportunities. The best hope for overcoming these handicappping conditions lies in catching them at a very early age; yet, little has been done to develop special educational programs for handicapped children from birth to the time they enter school. Before embarking on a full-scale effort to develop these programs, those concerned with assisting the handicapped child need to know what approaches may be most successful in promoting the utmost development of his capacities and to have available a variety of models to assist them in the careful implementation of major services to facilitate the early childhood development period of the handicapped child.

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For additional information on this program contact the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, Office of Education, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington, D. C. 20201.

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